

## Conference Paper

# Speech Behavior and Multimodality in Online Communication among Teenagers

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## Abstract

The article presents an analysis of online interactions among teenagers. The development of online communication is an important factor in the process of formation and reproduction of new social ties and relationships. Continuous online communication is becoming an important feature of everyday life. Online communication affects communication in general, developing its new requirements and standards. The polymethodic research consists of a questionnaire survey method and a content analysis method. The questionnaire was conducted among 50 teenagers aged 13-15, studying in schools of Ekaterinburg and regularly using the Internet to communicate with peers. A content analysis of online dialogs (n = 40) presented by the survey participants was also conducted. The research data proclaims social networks to be the most efficient tool of communication among modern teenagers. The most popular one is *Vkontakte*, which is used to chat and learn modern vocabulary.

The daily routine, including the learning process, is the main topic of communication. Teenagers hardly change their speech behavior, since online and offline communication occurs mainly in the same reference groups. Teenagers also use audio-visual materials, emojis, stickers, etc., to complete their messages and express their emotional state.

**Keywords:** online communication, teenagers, speech behavior, multimodality

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## 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the Internet is becoming increasingly important in modern society. It is a specific communication channel between different social groups, used for the production and consumption of information. The demand for the Internet, as well as its popularity and accessibility contribute to the development of information interaction and the formation of innovative structures of social relations. The constant use of the Internet as a communication tool has become an integral part of the lifestyle of the younger generation. Modern youth is described as using different types of gadgets to

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be constantly online. The young generation, born in the digital era and raised under the influence of information and communication technologies, is called *digital natives* [1], [2]. Young people are also defined as *youth go online* due to the new skill to "be constantly in touch" [3]. Cyber communication develops a fundamentally new communication environment and also affects its quality. Changes in communication environment affect speech behavior and culture of young people. Online communication requires compliance with new norms and standards. The reproduction of specific communication rules and patterns is a marker of social status and membership in a particular Internet community.

Since the main functions of the language (cognitive, communicative, manipulative etc.) are implemented within the framework of cyber communication, the speech behavior of teenagers is of particular research interest. The multimodal nature of online communication actualizes the analysis of new forms of communication used by the young generation to express their thoughts and emotions.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The increasing accessibility of the Web indicates its growing popularity among Internet users. The constant use of the Internet for nonprofessional or quasi-professional reasons has become commonplace because of its convenience [4]. Cyber communication affects the way of thinking, writing and speaking [5]. On average, people spend 3.2 hours a day chatting on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. As for Instagram, 40 million photos with 1,000 comments and 8,500 likes made per second are uploaded to the platform every day [6].

Recent studies indicate an increased scientific interest towards language analysis in cyber communication [7, 8]. There are different definitions for describing the issue in the scientific literature: *electronic discourse* [9], *cyberlanguage* [10], *netspeak* [11] and *virtual language* [12].

Technologized communication affects the speech behavior and speech culture of modern individuals, including young people. For example, we can observe the Americanization of linguistics, that is, the use of English words and expressions instead of their equivalents in their native language in online communication. This happens even though the native language, regarded as a communicative repertoire, provides daily interaction with the environment [13]. Speech behavior indicates that a person belongs to a particular group; it establishes social solidarity and is used among friends and acquaintances [14].

Speech behavior in cyber communication has its unique characteristics [15]. There are abbreviations, unconventional use of punctuation marks, spelling mistakes, as young people tend to write briefly and informally [16]. There are also clippings, logograms or alphanumeric characters [17]. Researchers are concerned that the younger generation does not pay much attention to the standard language, which may reduce the level of literacy in the future [18].

Visualization is one of the online trends actively used by Internet users [19]. Numerous signs, symbols, figures, graphic objects, etc. are represented in online communication. Monomodality is replaced by a complex integrated format for transmitting information. Communicative processes are based on the complex interaction of various sign systems, on multimodalities [20]. Modality has a sociocultural nature; it cannot be separated from subcultures of different social groups. This is the formation and combination of various codes for the presentation of information, the interaction between verbal text and an image (video), text size, font color, etc. [21]. A multimodal text integrates various codes that actualize different channels of perception to receive information.

The main goal of the 2018 study was to analyze the speech behavior of modern Russian teenagers in online communities. A polymethodic research consisted of a questionnaire survey method and a content analysis method, which have been used a lot to analyze communication in social media [22]. A mass questionnaire was conducted among teenagers aged 13-15, studying in Ekaterinburg schools and regularly using the Internet to communicate with peers. A content analysis of online dialogs presented by survey participants was also conducted.

To conduct the study, a special questionnaire was developed for teenagers. There were 37 questions of various types (open-ended questions, close-ended questions and semi-closed questions). The questionnaire used a nested sampling design. Students in grades 8 and 9 (ages 13-15) studying in secondary schools or gymnasiums in Ekaterinburg were examined for data collection. A total of 150 respondents were interviewed, including 65 (43.3%) boys and 85 (56.7%) girls. Data processing was carried out using the SPSS program, where all the necessary statistical calculations were performed.

Personal conversations of *Vkontakte* users were evaluated using the content analysis methodology. We developed a codifier consisting of categories and indicators of content analysis to identify these categories (topics of communication, role relationships, emotional state, social attitude, etc.) and a digital form for grouping text data. A total of 40 dialogs were analyzed. Screenshots of dialogs were anonymously sent by the study participants. The fact that the dialogs were chosen by the participants themselves is

considered a limitation of the study and is taken into account when analyzing and summarizing the study.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The results of the study showed that *Vkontakte* is the most popular online social networking service among modern teenagers (95.3%). They also use *WhatsApp* (66.7%) and *Instagram* (52.7%). In addition, *Telegram* messenger is gaining popularity among teenagers as one in four respondents already uses it.

According to the findings, there is no border between online and offline communication among teenagers, since they consider cyber communication a common feature of their real life. As a result, most teenagers reproduce the same online and offline behavior (71%), they do not have specific online communication strategies that differ from real communication patterns.

Most of the respondents confirm the transformations taking place in the language of real life, caused by the influence of cyber communication. Teenagers acquire a new vocabulary from the Web and use it in their speech (77%). Cyber communication also enriches the IT vocabulary used by teenagers to communicate on topics related to IT (42%). In addition, online communication reinforces the general linguistic tendency to reduce words (49% of respondents use text abbreviations).

At the same time, the Internet language is an important source of youth slang development; the formation of linguistic consciousness, linguistic literacy, as well as the linguistic competence of teenagers. The Internet itself acts as a field for linguistics games when new words or even whole phrases are created and then acquired by teenagers [23]. More than half of teenagers often use words derived from the Internet in real life (67%). It is to be noted that these words are used to communicate with reference groups; they are hardly ever used for communication with adults (parents, teachers, etc.).

Reality and virtual reality are also merged thanks to the topics of communication discussed online. Teenagers most often discuss their own lives (78%) or the lives of their friends (64%) in synchronous interpersonal online communication. They also chat about studying (55%), films and shows (48%), and computer games (43%), and this indicates that respondents discuss the most important topics over a period of time.

However, the content analysis data differ from the questionnaire findings. According to the content analysis, only 17% of conversations are dedicated to the life of the author; 37% of dialogs are devoted to studying; a third of the dialogs discuss the life

of another. Since the evaluated dialogs were chosen by the respondents themselves, this may indicate a certain willingness to demonstrate their interest in the educational process and hide their private life. It should also be mentioned that the most impersonal topics (computers and gadgets, games, films, etc.) are practically not represented in the analyzed conversations. Therefore, the respondents attempted to express their attitude to the presented issues, to demonstrate their subjectivity in the process of online communication.

According to the study, online communication is one of the most effective ways to communicate with friends and acquaintances, but not the only one for most teenagers (87%). The content analysis showed that online communication takes place between peers (97%) and mostly of the same sex (71%). In addition, cyber communication is hardly seen as a way to meet other people. This is seen as a way to keep in touch with friends and becomes a tool for phatic communication. For this reason, it becomes an important part of the daily life of teenagers, preserving their individuality and confirming their inclusion in social groups and practices. Teenagers communicate mainly with close friends (45%). Another 50% of online chats are with acquaintances (they know them in real life, have common friends, meet them at certain events, etc.), and only 5% of online conversations are with acquaintances they do not know in real life.

Moreover, among teenagers, the most preferred way to contact their friends is through an online text message (77%). They can also phone their friends (48%) or meet in person (44%), but only if the written message fails.

Teenagers confirm that they act online in the same way as in real life, regardless of their interlocutor. The behavior patterns of teenagers are no different because they do not distinguish the online communication from the offline one. Consequently, the same patterns of behavior cannot be considered as a sign of close friendship.

Young Internet users are always online. These are teenagers who feel the need to immediately respond to all updates and new messages (69%). It is important for them not to miss the moment and be in constant social interaction. Every fourth respondent checks for updates on social networks several times during the hour, spending more than 5 hours a day on this.

An important characteristic of online behavior is the willingness to express one's opinion. The majority of respondents (83%) confirm that they are ready to express their opinion in one-on-one online dialogs on any issue. Online discussion is a platform on which teenagers are not afraid to express their thoughts, argue or persuade someone to accept their point of view. At the same time, half of the respondents are also ready to accept the point of view of their interlocutor.

However, these findings are relevant for synchronous interpersonal communication, when teenagers are on their own and are ready to show their individuality. Teenagers are extremely careful when they upload content (photos, comments, stories, etc.) to social networks. Before uploading, they thoroughly select content, close their account and comments (29% of respondents never post about themselves, 39% of respondents almost never publish photos and facts about themselves).

Such behavior can be caused by various factors, such as the following: a growing network threat (for example, social media *groups of death* promoting suicide among teenagers), parental control in social media, psychological complexes typical of adolescents, etc. However, together with the willingness to protect themselves in social networks, teenagers do not demonstrate their private life to a wider audience due to the insecurity and inconsistency inherent in adolescents in general. But the clearest explanation for this behavior is the desire to divide their followers into *friends* and *others*. Teenagers are not ready to share their content with everyone. They are ready to communicate with representatives of reference groups with whom they are interested in communicating (76%) and whose opinion is important for them (66%).

When the questionnaire data analysis showed that teenagers are ready to participate in discussions, the content analysis of the presented conversations announced other findings of the study. 61% of the conversations do not contain any arguments, the interlocutors communicate without a clear attitude to the matter. In a third of the dialogs, the author supports the thoughts of the interlocutor. There are only 11% of conversations when the interlocutors disagree with each other. Teenagers almost always exclude from the list of their friends people with radically different views (89%) or those who actively promote (impose) different points of view (97%). The results of the study demonstrate that the speech behavior of young people, both online and offline, depends on the norms and expectations of the reference groups.

Emotionality as one of the main characteristics of adolescence also has an impact on speech behavior, which affects multimodality. Teenagers themselves confirm that online communication greatly affects their mood. Frequent mood swings during online communication are common for 47% of respondents. The content analysis of the dialogs demonstrates that only 37% of conversations are emotionally neutral.

According to the study, teenagers express their emotions and feelings with words (66%) or emojis (63%). Fewer teens use punctuation marks to express their emotions (53%). New elements of communication, such as voice messages (42%) and stickers (37%), are also gaining popularity among teenagers. A third of teenagers still express their emotions in capital letters using caps lock mode on the keyboard.

In accordance with the content analysis, 43% of teenagers tend to use punctuation marks to express emotions. 36% of them use emojis and only 27% of them use emotional vocabulary to show their feelings. We also have to emphasize that, as a rule, text messages of teenagers are more emotionally diverse than their voice messages, since teenagers are usually not ready to express their feelings out loud.

## 4. Conclusion

On the basis of the presented study, we conclude the following. The average teenager, constantly communicating online, tends to use *Vkontakte* as the main social media to interact with his or her friends. The Internet for teenagers is becoming the main means of communication, also used to develop their own definitions and slang.

Almost always, teenagers communicate with same-sex peers to discuss everyday situations and study. The speech behavior of teenagers online and offline does not differ from each other, since teens practically do not distinguish between virtual and real communication. At the same time, teenagers tend to communicate with those whose opinion is important to them. They do not discuss their problems and do not show their feelings, do not share their personal information with people who are not in their inner circle. If teenagers want to contact one of their friends, they will write a text message on one of the social networks. To complete their message and express their emotions, teenagers use not only text messages, but also audiovisual materials, emojis, stickers, etc.

Online communication is entering new areas of modern life. Its scope and functions are growing rapidly. Its forms and content are becoming more complex. This is an issue of future research on the study of this social phenomenon that implements an interdisciplinary approach.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.



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